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ABSTRACT

A 25-year-old male instructor of Korean, Japanese, Hawaiian, American, and Australian background teaching predominantly 20-year-old, white students at a midwestern university developed an activity to introduce interpersonal communication to the students on the first day of class. Objectives were to develop in learners: (1) an awareness of sociopsychological processes embedded in interpersonal communication; (2) an awareness of the students' own assumptions and how they relate to interpersonal communication; (3) a greater understanding of the role of nonverbal cues; and (4) an appreciation of communicating on an interpersonal level and not stereotyping. An intern entered the class, told the students that the instructor was running late, and played an audiotape recording of the instructor, which asked the students to write down details of the instructor based on the tape recording. The instructor (who entered the classroom earlier and took a seat among the students) then walked to the front of the class and revealed that he was the instructor. Subsequent class discussion focused on issues raised in the students' writing. The 64 students who were exposed to this exercise in the Spring of 1995 were asked to respond anonymously to questions regarding the exercise. Major themes that emerged were stereotyping (including how strongly some stereotypes are embedded); vocalics (such as how vocalics influenced people's thoughts); introduction to later material in the course; and icebreaker (indicating that the exercise was a creative introduction to the class. The exercise, or some variation, can be used in any interpersonal or intercultural communication course. (RS)

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"'Hi! I'm your instructor...BELIEVE IT OR NOT:' An exercise confronting stereotypes in the first day of an interpersonal communication class"

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Introduction

I really do not remember how the idea entered my mind. I believe that after teaching an interpersonal communication class for a few semesters I was searching for a new manner in which to begin the class, something a little different from immediately moving into class description, and instructor/student introductions. Here I was, a 25 year old male of Korean-Japanese-Hawaiian-American-Australian background teaching predominantly 20 to 21 year old white, mid-western Americans at a large midwestern university. "How could I use the seemingly disparate backgrounds of me and my students and appropriately introduce interpersonal communication?" I asked myself. This paper will outline the exercise that I finally developed and implemented at the beginning of the first day of an interpersonal communication class. I will discuss first the objectives that this exercise hoped to accomplish, the logistics of this exercise, responses from students concerning this exercise, and finally, possibilities for application to other classes.

Objectives

1. To develop in learners an awareness of sociopsychological processes embedded in interpersonal communication.

Learners should become aware of how certain variables, such as categorization, stereotyping, prejudice, and social identities, are integral to the process of interpersonal communication. By being alerted to major sociopsychological factors that influence interpersonal communication, learners can better analyze interactions and work to overcome problems in interpersonal situations.

2. To develop in learners an awareness of one's own assumptions and how they relate to interpersonal communication.

Learners should develop an awareness of personal beliefs, values and attitudes, and how these assumptions connect to communication. This awareness should be developed through analyzing the interfacing of the self and other in a specific, concrete context (this exercise). In turn, this critical ownership of one's assumptions and how they interact with communication will allow one to communicate more effectively with persons.

3. To develop in learners a greater understanding of the role of nonverbal cues in interpersonal communication.

Learners should realize from this exercise how vocalics and context are powerfully part of the interpersonal communication process. Learners will understand how vocal characteristics are often used to infer personality traits.

4. To develop in learners an appreciation of communicating on an interpersonal level and not stereotyping.

Learners should come to value the importance of guarding against rigid categorizing and stereotyping of others.

Logistics of the Exercise

Preparations for the exercise

Preparations for this exercise include first the instructor preparing an audiotaped message for the class to hear. In my message I state that I am running a little late and will be there in class soon. Experience has shown me that the taped message should begin with the statement that I will be there in class shortly. This is important because when I did not begin with a statement such a this, students became very restless and one person even walked out of class. On the tape, I then go on to give some background information concerning the course. Finally, I ask on the tape for people in the class to take out paper and based on what they have just heard write down their description of me. Having readied an

audiotaped message to be played at the beginning of the first class, the next step is to prepare someone to set up the tape-recorder and play the audiotape in class. In my class I request my intern to carry out these duties. I instruct the intern, who is a senior or junior and has taken my class before, to wait a few minutes for the class to settle and allow for anyone in late search of the classroom to enter. The intern is then to explain to the class that your instructor is running a little late, but he did want me to play this tape for you. I instruct my intern to be careful in referring to me as either "he" or "your instructor" and not to give out any other details, such as my name, which may afford my students further information about me. I ask the intern to write on the board after playing the tape the categories for which students are to write about me. These categories include: age, marital status, maximum education, interests, nationality, personality, and physical appearance. The last step in my preparations for this exercise is to dress in attire and carry artifacts (for example, use a bookbag instead of a briefcase) that would allow me to be inconspicuous if placed among my students.

Proceeding with the exercise

In carrying out the exercise I enter the class a few minutes before my intern. I do not want to be in any way linked with my intern and instructing the class so I enter early in my appropriate dress attire and blend in with the class, usually sitting in the back of the classroom. My intern enters the class and previews the tape-playing. He or she then plays the tape. After the tape is played, students should be writing details about me according to the categories stated in the taped message and those that are written on the board by my intern.

After waiting for most people in the class to finish their writing, I walk slowly up to the front of the class, put my bookbag down, turn around, and say, "Hi, I'm your T.A. (or instructor)" After this announcement, I usually observe

from students many smiles, laughing, nervous laughing, bulging eyeballs, and so forth. I ask for people to share their honest responses and not feel the need to change any answers. If their descriptions were extremely different from the person who was presently at the front of class, this was acceptable and understandable. They further need not feel threatened in that I will not be collecting their sheets of paper.

At this point, I introduce myself and compare the responses of students with how I would describe myself according to the categories specified. People in past classes generally reveal accurate information concerning the categories of age, marital status, maximum education, interests, and personality. "Nationality" descriptions were also primarily correct, although certain past responses have indicated that I was from Britain, Boston, or the east coast. The physical appearance category seemed to receive the most inaccurate descriptions. That is, many in the class predicted me to be tall, white, and blonde. A female student this semester wrote that I was the "Aussie surfer type." A few persons judged from the texture of my voice that I was dark-haired, although this was quite the exception. Throughout this discussion, I make a point of continually asking students to explain how they came to the conclusions they reached.

The final step in proceeding with the activity is to ask the class if there were any conclusions or lessons they could draw from this activity other than it being an entertaining manner in which to begin class. We usually summarize what made people write down what they did. We discuss how they judged according to stereotypes. We discuss the stereotypical portrayal of an Australian man and how I do not fit that portrayal and yet consider myself undeniably Australian. We discuss how categorization is inevitable and how rigidly categorizing and stereotyping is problematic as evidenced by this exercise. We discussed the value of communicating on an interpersonal level. We discuss how this exercise made

the familiar exotic. That is, the "familiar" conception of an Australian as blonde and white is exoticized when a dark-haired Australian of Asian ethnicity stands up in front of class as the instructor. In addition, students experience a unique twist in the beginning of an interpersonal communication class with the tape-recorder exercise. Similar to a goal of this exercise, one of the goals of the class during the semester is to deem what is familiar exotic. Interpersonal communication, which is engaged in by everyone on a daily basis and is often taken for granted, will be shown to be more complex than what many people have expected.

Another conclusion that emerges out of this discussion is how such nonverbal cues as vocal characteristics and physical environmental cues are key to interpersonal communication. We discuss how vocal characteristics such as loudness, pitch, inflection, tempo, rhythm, intensity, articulation, resonance, silences, and dialect relay information about a person. In addition, the context of beginning the class with this tape-recorder exercise and how this may differ from persons' more familiar frames of reference regarding the conducting of first day of classes, allowed people to infer traits of the instructor's personality and the class in general. A significant theme in the class is to show that people communicate more than what they simply say. In this manner, people gained information from aspects other than the content of my message.

Responses from Students

I asked recently my present, sixty-four, spring, 1995 students three questions concerning the tape-recorder exercise. The questions were:

1.*Write your general reactions to the tape-recorder exercise conducted on the first day of class.*

2.*What did the exercise accomplish?*

3. *How did the exercise fit into the first day of an interpersonal communication class?*

Following are the major themes that emerged from the anonymous responses of my students to these questions:

Stereotyping

Many comments centered on the limitations of stereotyping and how strongly certain stereotypes are embedded. Students stated that this exercise reinforced how people easily make false judgments and incorrectly stereotype all the time. A number of students were either shocked or surprised at how differently they pictured me. A male student commented, "When you got up and started walking to the middle of the room, I was thinking to myself, 'Who is this guy???' He's probably so out of it that he didn't even realize he's in the wrong class." In the words of another student, "I was totally blown away when I saw that you were Asian." A female student acknowledged, "At least on my part, I really fell into the whole stereotypical train of thought. When I heard your Australian accent I immediately thought of Crocodile Dundee and laid-back Australians, etc....I think it really shows that people cannot make generalizations based on a small amount of information." In general, many persons were surprised at how their stereotypes did not match up with me. According to a female student, "...we learned a lot by analyzing our assumptions we made on you." Students concluded that our initial reactions and preconceptions about people are not always on target and that one can never assume anything about anyone.

A couple of persons liked the manner in which the exercise targeted the issue of stereotyping. According to one student, the exercise actually showed people certain stereotypes that they possess. Persons may not have as easily viewed or admitted their stereotypes if the instructor had simply asked who stereotypes

people. Another person stated that the exercise helped view people in a natural setting.

Vocalics

A number of people learned more about how vocalics influence people's thoughts. A female student related, "It (the exercise) made me evaluate things like tone, inflection, pitch, and other qualities of a person's voice..." A male student shared, "From your voice, I thought you were some white guy, but I saw that you weren't when you identified yourself." Another female noted, "It showed that many of us have stereotypical ideas. i.e. With your accent, people thought you were Australian and therefore tall with blonde hair. It also showed that people pick up on a lot of other things just from tone of voice, pitch, voice inflection, etc." People found interesting how one came to conclusions and held assumptions about physical and personality characteristics based only on hearing a voice without prior physical contact. The use of metamessages to attribute information about a person was illustrated.

Introduction to Later Material

A number of responses indicated that the exercise provided a precursor for material that would follow later in the semester. One student stated, "This exercise is a perfect introduction to the material we cover later on in the course." Persons noted that the exercise moved the class into discussion that directly related to ideas in this class, such as how interpersonal communication does not occur only on a verbal level. A female summarized, "It (the exercise) fit into the first day of an interpersonal communication class in that we come across situations like this every day, even though we are not aware of it. We make assumptions about people when we first meet them based on physical

characteristics and other "immediately available" information -- such as manner and content of speech, body movements, and overall disposition. The exercise helped to show that these initial assumptions are often proven wrong once we get to know the person better." Another female student perceived the exercise to fit very well into the class "...since the recurring theme of this class has been the message beneath or beyond that which is actually said." Yet another person viewed that the exercise gave the class a concrete example of some of the topics that "...we'd be discussing. For example, it illustrated how we infer different personality traits from many areas such as vocalics and cultural stereotypes."

Icebreaker

Another general reaction to the exercise is that it was a nicely, creative introduction to the class. More than one person commented that it was a "cool idea!" Students referred to it as different, thought-provoking, better than a typical first day of class, and that it aroused their curiosity in that they knew that the class was going to be interesting, "open-minded," and the instructor cared about the class. Others mentioned that the exercise was amusing, fun, and a good ice-breaker. It made the class atmosphere more relaxing. One female wrote that the "...exercise was an icebreaker during which everyone could get to know each other a little since it (the exercise) was like a game so people really wanted to contribute something to the discussion." A male student claimed that the exercise "...got the class talking (easier because it was about you rather than ourselves)." Likewise, a female student wrote that, "It ... caused us to feel comfortable in class because we ... got to know you better." A few persons felt more comfortable in sharing from their lives after I had conveyed personal information through the exercise about myself first.

Application to Other Classes

First, while being of Asian ethnicity and brandishing an Australian accent might allow me to "shock" my predominantly white, midwestern students a little more than other instructors, I am convinced that this is an exercise worthwhile with which to begin any interpersonal communication class. Other variations may include the instructor requesting someone with a diverse background and exhibiting an unpredictable matchup of vocal and physical characteristics to be part of the exercise if the instructor is uncomfortable in proceeding with the exercise using him or herself. This exercise may also be conducted at another time in the semester, such as during a section on stereotyping, and not simply at the beginning of the first day of class. Another variation to the exercise would have the instructor or someone elicited by the instructor appearing at the front of class without speaking. Students would then be given instructions in written form to write about the person (personality traits, speaking style, etc.) in front of them based solely on his or her physical appearance. Finally, this exercise need not be confined to simply an interpersonal communication class, but may be extended to other classes. For example, using this exercise in an intercultural communication course seems highly appropriate.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has outlined an audiotape-related exercise that may be conducted on the first day of an interpersonal communication class. Objectives of this exercise are given. Specific details associated with preparation and proceeding with the exercise are explained along with my own experiences in carrying out the exercise in my classes. Responses from students in my present class are detailed. Comments relating to the limitations of stereotypes, vocalics as a part of interpersonal communication, the exercise providing an introduction to

later class material, and the exercise proving as an effective ice-breaker are summarized. Finally, ways in which the exercise may be applied in various forms to other classes are discussed. This exercise has been memorable to many of my past and present students. It is a definite attention-getter and yet hopefully proves a valuable learning experience. My wish is for others to gain the same benefits and satisfaction from instituting a similar version of this exercise as I do when I walk up to the front of my interpersonal communication course on the first day of class and pronounce, "Hi! I'm your instructor."